

# EFFECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING METHOD WITH FREE WRITING TECHNIQUE ON STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ESSAY WRITING IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN EKITI STATE

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## Abstract

*Recognizing the pivotal role of effective communication in education, particularly through writing. This research addresses the persistent challenges students face in mastering essay writing: a skill crucial for academic success and standardized testing, such as the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) in Nigeria. This study investigates the effects of a blended learning method combined with a free-writing technique on students' performance in essay writing within public secondary schools in Ekiti State. The study employed an experimental design with a sample of 108 students selected from a population of 24,342. Participants were divided into an experimental group which received instruction through blended learning combined with free-writing techniques, and a control group, which was taught using conventional methods. Data were collected using the Students' Performance in Essay Writing (SPEW) instrument. The results reveal a significant improvement in essay writing performance among students exposed to the blended learning method with free writing techniques. The experimental group's mean score increased from 53.17 (SD = 10.64) in the pre-test to 82.95 (SD = 5.02) in the post-test, whereas the control group's mean score increased from 53.69 (SD = 8.99) to 64.86 (SD = 10.19). The Statistical analyses revealed a significant difference between the groups with the experimental group outperforming the control group in essay writing. These findings showed that blending traditional teaching with digital technology and incorporating free-writing techniques effectively enhances students' writing skills. It was recommended among others that educational institutions should consider integrating blended learning approaches that combine digital and traditional teaching methods. This can provide students with a more flexible, interactive, and personalized learning experience, enhancing their engagements and understanding of essay writing techniques, thereby enhancing students' better competence and proficiency in essay writing.*

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, Free writing Techniques, Essay Writing, Performance, Students, and Public Secondary Schools.

## Introduction

Effective communication is crucial in all areas of human interactions, from personal relationships to business interactions. As noted by researchers Kim and Ko (2021), effective communication enables individuals to build trust, establish relationships and achieve their goals. To communicate effectively,

one must have a thorough understanding of the rules and principles that govern communication. This is particularly true in language, which is the primary tool human beings use to convey meaning. As stated by Kramsch and Whiteside (2020), language is the lifeblood of human communication' and it is critical to social interaction. Dada and Sanni

(2021) further reinstate that language is the most important tool of communication among the human species.

Proficiency in a language refers to the ability to effectively use and understand the language in various contexts. It involves competence in four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening skill plays a crucial role in language proficiency. Wang, Hsieh, and Chang (2022) state that effective listening skill enables learners to comprehend spoken language, extract relevant information and interpret meaning accurately. Through active listening, learners can improve their vocabulary, grammar, and overall understanding of the language. Speaking skill involves the ability to express oneself fluently and coherently in a language. Lee and Chen (2021) highlight that speaking proficiency allows individuals to communicate their thoughts, opinions, and ideas effectively. It involves proper pronunciation, intonation, and the ability to engage in conversations, presentations, and discussions. One of the major objectives of teaching English language in schools is for students to be able to use the language for effective communication within and outside the school setting.

Reading is another important language skill. According to Smith and Brown (2022) reading skill refers to the ability to understand written texts in a language. Proficient reading skill is crucial for acquiring new vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and cultural knowledge. Effective reading comprehension enables learners to extract information, make inferences, and critically analyze written materials, including books, articles, and online resources. Writing skill involves the ability to produce coherent and well-structured written texts in a language.

Proficient writing skill can enable learners to convey their thoughts, opinions, and arguments clearly and effectively. Writing proficiency encompasses grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary usage, organisation of ideas, and adherence to specific writing conventions. Among these language skills, writing seems to constitute the most tasking to students of English language despite the fact that writing plays an essential role in personal and professional growth for individuals and its importance in academic settings cannot be overstated.

Writing also serves as a means of evaluating students' knowledge and academic capability on high-stakes educational assessments (Levstik & Barton, 2015). In Nigeria, one such high-stake examination is the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) for students exiting the secondary level of education.

Despite the significance of writing in academic settings, many students still struggle with writing tasks, particularly essay writing. This may be due to various reasons such as inadequate writing skills, lack of motivation, and difficulty in generating ideas. The importance of writing skills in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. English Language is mandatory for admission into higher education institutions, necessitating a minimum credit pass. A significant number of Nigerian students seem to encounter difficulties while writing English language. According to Adedeji (2018), the competency of Nigerian students in writing English language is notably low, leading to inadequate performance in English Language examinations.

Effective writing requires a good understanding of the rhetorical structures that underpin different types of texts (Hyland, 2020). Also, as the content knowledge is essential, students are evaluated to know how to organise the contents to meet the writing task. However, teachers often focus more on the contents of essays than on text organisation, which seems to leave students struggling to understand the underlying structures of particular essay types.

The performance of Nigerian students in English Language examinations has been a matter of concern in recent years. In 2014, WAEC gave a report of the performance in English Language at the national level with only 31.28% of candidates obtaining credits (WAEC, 2020). WAEC Chief Examiner's report of SSCE 2015 further revealed that most candidates lost marks assigned to spelling, punctuation marks, grammatical expression, and sequence of tenses in essay writing because they were unable to handle these aspects of the language effectively. Most students scored between zero and ten marks in essay writing, indicating a significant poor performance in their writing skills.

While there was a slight improvement in 2016, the performance of candidates in subsequent years (2017, 2018 & 2019) remained poor (WAEC Annual Reports, 2020). The situation is not different in Ekiti State, where the results of the May/June 2022 examinations reveal that 49.8% of candidates obtained below credit in English Language (Ekiti State Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2023).

In view of the above, the performance of Nigerian students in English Language examinations is a matter of concern, especially in Ekiti State. The key factor behind this poor

performance may likely be due to poor writing skills, including poor text organisation, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

In response to this situation, stakeholders are agitating for improved methods for teaching essay writing skill to students. This is because it is believed that good methods of teaching may help students overcome many of these challenges they face while writing essay. It is crucial, therefore, to address the underlying issues in essay writing instruction in order to improve students' performance in English Language.

However, the traditional chalk and talk method of teaching, which is still commonly used in many schools, may not be effective enough for developing students' writing skills. As noted by Al-Saraj and El-Khawas (2020), this method tends to focus on the transmission of information from teacher to students, with little opportunity for interaction or collaboration. The limitations on students' engagement and motivation may hinder their assimilation of subject matter, as emphasised in the original text. In view of the observed inadequacies in the use of traditional teaching method, the researcher is of the opinion that there seems to be more other teaching methods that are likely to be more effective than the conventional methods. These include blended learning method with free-writing technique which may likely provide opportunities for interactions, collaboration and feed-back, thereby fostering active learning which may help students to develop effective writing skill.

Blended learning, as described by Hilliard (2015), is an instructional approach that combines traditional classroom teaching with digital technology to enhance the acquisition of knowledge and skills applicable to

professional settings. It offers students the opportunity to learn in both physical and online environments, granting them autonomy over their learning journey, approach, speed, and utilization.

A blended learning method combined face to face classroom interaction with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach. For example, a blended approach to a traditional face to face course might mean that the class meets once per week instead of the usual three-session format. Learning activities that would have taken place during classroom time can be moved to online classes (Hilliard, 2015).

The goal of a blended method is to join the best aspects of both face to face and online interactions. Classroom time can be used to engage students in advanced interactive experiences. Meanwhile, the online portion of the course can provide students with multimedia-rich contents at any time of the day, anywhere the student has internet access. This allows for an increase in scheduling flexibility for students.

The use of blended learning has been shown to improve students' learning outcomes, resulting in higher grades, increased knowledge, and better understanding of theories and concepts (Poon, 2013). Blended learning can also help foster a learning community by promoting collaboration, interaction, and motivation among students and teachers (Paily, 2013). However, it requires a significant shift in the teachers' role, and they should not assume a passive and non-directive role in their teaching or their students' learning.

Free-writing is a writing technique where individuals write continuously for a set period of time without worrying about grammar,

spelling, or punctuation. The primary goal of free-writing is to generate ideas, overcome writer's block, and tap into the subconscious mind's creativity Ferris (2014). Seohyun (2016) claims that students in the free-writing group made much more progress in English speaking, writing, listening, and reading than their peers. Chang (2020) submits that the students were more confidence during the writing activity. Besides should not concern with grammar and spelling. In this research, the writer focuses on blended learning method with free-writing technique. It is clearly that free-writing is one of helpful technique to generate ideas before writing. Free-writing of journals consists of all three levels. In the beginning, the general and linguistic skills and knowledge of the learners develop, which activates the writing process. This level then interacts with the student's activities, thus controlling his or her writing. This form of writing gives students more control of their own writing and inspires them to write freely without fear of being criticized. Ferris (2014) strongly backs personal essays and journal writing as essential activities that can encourage learners to write freely.

Blended learning method with free-writing techniques seems to be valuable in teaching and learning. Blended learning integrates traditional classroom teaching with digital technology, providing flexibility and improved learning outcomes. On the other hand, free-writing will encourage creative thinking and problem-solving by breaking away from old patterns of reasoning. The cognitive theory of free-writing is based on the mental process of creating a solution to a problem. Free-writing seem to be important techniques for essay writing because they may help learners create a cognitive structure for generating solutions to problems. Free-writing can

be effective techniques for promoting creativity and problem-solving. It is relaxed and informal technique to problem-solving, lateral thinking, and the breaking of old patterns of reasoning.

The seemingly fluctuation in students' performance in English Language needs to be addressed so as to improve their performance in the subject, hence, this study will investigate the effects of using blended learning with free writing technique on students' performance in essay writing in public secondary schools in Ekiti State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Effective communication is a cornerstone of human interaction, essential for building relationships and achieving personal and professional goals. Language, being the primary tool for communication, is fundamental to social interaction and educational success. Proficiency in language, particularly in writing, plays a critical role in academic performance and personal development. Despite its importance, students often struggle with writing tasks, particularly essay writing, which is crucial for high-stakes educational assessments such as the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) in Nigeria.

The performance of Nigerian students in English language examinations has consistently been a concern. Reports indicate that students frequently exhibit poor writing skills, including difficulties with text organization, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. For instance, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) has documented low pass rates and frequent errors in essay writing, reflecting a broader issue in students' writing proficiency.

Traditional teaching methods, such as the chalk-and-talk approach,

may not effectively address these challenges, as they often lack interactive and engaging elements that foster deeper learning and skill development. This has led to a call for improved instructional strategies that can better support students in developing their writing skills.

Blended learning, which integrates traditional classroom instruction with digital technology, and free-writing techniques, which encourage idea generation and creative thinking, have shown promise in enhancing learning outcomes. However, their potential benefits in improving essay writing skills among secondary school students in Ekiti State have not been thoroughly explored.

Given these challenges, there is a need to investigate how blended learning combined with free-writing techniques can impact students' performance in essay writing. This study aims to address this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of these methods in improving writing proficiency and academic performance in public secondary schools in Ekiti State.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study will be to investigate the effects of blended learning method with free writing technique on students' performance in essay writing in public secondary schools in Ekiti State. Specifically, the study:

1. determine the effect of blended learning method with free-writing techniques on students' performance in essay writing; and
2. compare the effect of blended learning with free writing technique and conventional method on students' performance in essay writing;

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the performance of students in essay writing before and after exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods?

**Research Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students before exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods.
2. There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students exposed to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods after the treatment.

**Methodology**

The research design involved an experimental approach encompassing a population of approximately 24,342 from which a sample of 108 students was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Participants were divided into two groups: the experimental group, which received

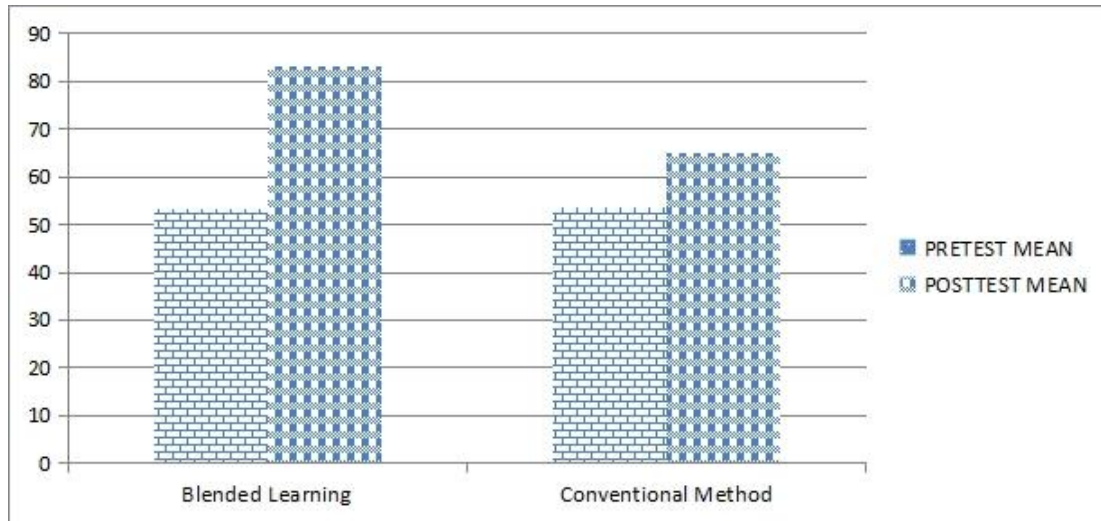
instruction through blended learning combined with free writing techniques, and the control group, which was taught using conventional methods. The study included a pre-test to gauge students' initial writing performance, followed by the intervention, and a post-test to measure any changes in writing abilities. Data collection was done using an instrument tagged Students' Performance in Essay Writing (SPEW). This was used to conduct pre-tests and post-tests to evaluate essay writing performance before and after the intervention. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation while inferential statistics, such as t-tests analysis was used test the hypotheses. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

**Results**

**Research Question 1:** What is the performance of students in essay writing before and after exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods?

**Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Performance of Students in essay writing before and after exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods**

	PRETEST			POSTTEST		
	N	MEAN	S.D	MEAN	S.D	M.D
Blended Learning	59	53.17	10.64	82.95	5.02	29.78
Conventional Method	49	53.69	8.99	64.86	10.19	11.17



**Figure 1: Bar Chart of the Performance of Students in essay writing before and after exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods**

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of students' performance in both the pre-test and post-test phases. For the blended learning group, the mean score increased from 53.17 (SD = 10.64) in the pre-test to 82.95 (SD = 5.02) in the post-test, resulting in a mean difference (M.D) of 29.78. In contrast, the conventional method group showed a smaller increase in mean scores, from 53.69 (SD = 8.99) in the pre-test to 64.86 (SD = 10.19) in the post-test, with a mean difference of 11.17. These results, illustrated in Figure 1, reveals that students exposed to blended learning with the free writing technique experienced a significantly greater improvement in essay writing

performance compared to those taught using conventional methods. The large mean difference and the lower post-test standard deviation in the blended learning group indicate not only a higher overall performance but also more consistent results among students. This implies that the blended learning approach with free writing techniques is more effective in enhancing students' essay writing skills.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students before exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods.

**Table 2: T-test Analysis of the significant difference in the essay writing performance of students before exposing them to blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods**

	N	MEAN	S.D	Df	t-cal	p-value
Blended Learning	59	53.17	10.64	106	0.273	0.70
Conventional Method	49	53.69	8.99			

**P<0.05**

The results on table 2 reveal that the mean score for the blended learning group was 53.17 (SD = 10.64), while the mean score for the conventional

method group was 53.69 (SD = 8.99). The calculated t-value was 0.273 with a p-value of 0.70, indicating that the difference in mean scores between the

two groups was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected, suggesting that there was no significant difference in students' essay writing performance before they were exposed to either the blended learning approach or the conventional teaching methods. This implies that both groups had

similar baseline writing abilities prior to the intervention.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students exposed blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods after the treatment.

**Table 3: T-test Analysis of the significant difference in the essay writing performance of students exposed blended learning with free writing technique and conventional methods after the treatment.**

	N	MEAN	S.D	Df	t-cal	p-value
Blended Learning	59	82.95	5.02	106	12.001	0.000
Conventional Method	49	64.86	10.19			

**P < 0.05**

The results in table 3 reveals that the mean score for students in the blended learning group was significantly higher at 82.95 (SD = 5.02) compared to the conventional method group, which had a mean score of 64.86 (SD = 10.19). The calculated t-value was 12.001 with a p-value of 0.000, which is highly significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). These findings reject the null hypothesis, showing that there is a significant difference in essay writing performance between the two groups after the treatment. The students exposed to blended learning with the free writing technique showed considerably better performance in essay writing compared to those taught using conventional methods, indicating the effectiveness of the blended learning with the free writing technique approach in enhancing students' writing skills.

**Discussion**

The study reveals that the blended learning approach with free writing techniques is more effective in enhancing students' essay writing skills. The effectiveness of the blended learning approach lies in its ability to integrate technology with traditional

teaching methods, creating a more personalized and interactive learning experience. This method facilitates self-paced learning, allowing students to revisit materials and practice writing at their own pace, which enhances retention and understanding of essay writing techniques. The incorporation of free writing exercises further promotes creativity and fluency, enabling students to express their ideas more freely and effectively without the constraints of structured writing from the outset. These findings carry significant implications for educational practice, particularly in secondary education, where the adoption of technology-driven teaching strategies alongside conventional methods could lead to improved student engagement, better learning outcomes, and more effective skill development, especially in areas requiring critical thinking and articulation. The success of free writing techniques within the blended learning framework also underscores the importance of fostering an environment that encourages creative expression, thereby improving technical writing skills and building students' confidence in their writing abilities. Recent studies, such as those

by Boelens, De Wever, and Voet (2017) and Means et al. (2020), support these findings, highlighting the flexibility and deeper learning outcomes associated with blended learning environments. Additionally, research by Zhang and Zhu (2018) emphasizes the effectiveness of free writing techniques in enhancing writing fluency and creativity, leading to more authentic and well-developed essays when structured writing is later introduced.

The findings of the study reveal that students exposed to both the blended learning approach with free writing techniques and the conventional method had similar baseline writing abilities before the treatment. This indicates that any differences observed after the intervention can be attributed to the instructional methods rather than pre-existing variations in ability. The similarity in baseline abilities ensures a fair and unbiased comparison between the two approaches, aligning with research that emphasizes the importance of comparable starting points to minimize confounding variables (Slavin, 2019). This finding is significant as it underscores the validity of the analysis, confirming that improvements in writing skills are directly linked to the teaching method. The implications for educators and curriculum developers are substantial, as it suggests that the effectiveness of different instructional strategies can be accurately assessed when students start at the same level. Furthermore, it highlights that blended learning, particularly when combined with creative exercises like free writing, is as accessible and effective as traditional methods, making it a viable option in diverse educational settings. Supporting literature, such as the work of Cheung and Slavin (2016) and Means et al. (2020), emphasizes the importance of controlling for baseline

abilities in educational research, further validating the study's conclusions.

The findings of the study underscore the significant effectiveness of the blended learning approach combined with free writing techniques in improving students' writing skills, particularly in essay writing in English. This enhancement is largely due to the blended learning model's ability to merge digital and traditional teaching methods, creating a more personalized and interactive learning experience. The flexibility inherent in blended learning allows students to engage with materials at their own pace, revisit difficult concepts, and receive immediate feedback through digital platforms, which likely contributed to the observed improvements in their writing skills. The integration of free writing exercises further boosted students' progress by encouraging them to express their ideas freely without the constraints of strict structure, thereby fostering creativity and fluency. This practice built their confidence in idea generation and articulation, essential components of effective essay writing, and facilitated the transfer of these skills to more structured tasks, resulting in significant gains in overall writing performance. The implications for educational practice are profound, suggesting that integrating technology-enhanced learning models with traditional methods can lead to better student engagement, more effective learning outcomes, and improved skill development, particularly in areas requiring critical thinking and articulation. This is in line with Boelens, De Wever, and Voet (2017) who highlight the flexibility and personalized nature of blended learning environments, which allow students to engage with educational materials at their own pace and receive immediate feedback through digital

platforms. This flexibility can accommodate diverse learning styles and needs, leading to enhanced academic outcomes. Their research demonstrates that students in blended learning settings often show improved performance due to the ability to tailor their learning experiences and the continuous support provided by digital tools.

Similarly, Zhang and Zhu (2018) emphasize the role of free writing exercises in fostering students' writing fluency and creativity. Their study shows that free writing encourages students to explore their thoughts and ideas without the constraints of strict structural or grammatical rules. This unstructured practice helps students become more comfortable and confident in their writing, which translates into better performance in more formal writing tasks. By removing initial writing constraints, free writing exercises enable students to develop their ideas more freely and effectively, leading to significant improvements in their overall writing skills. Means et al. (2020) further support these findings by demonstrating that students in blended learning environments often outperform their peers in traditional settings. Their research attributes this success to the combination of face-to-face instruction with online interactions, which promotes deeper learning and skill development. The integration of digital tools with conventional teaching methods creates a richer learning experience that can enhance students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals the effectiveness of the blended learning approach combined with free writing techniques in significantly

improving students' essay writing skills. This improvement is largely due to the blended learning model's ability to integrate digital and traditional teaching methods, allowing for a more personalized and interactive learning experience. Students benefit from the flexibility to learn at their own pace, revisit difficult concepts, and receive immediate feedback, which enhances their understanding and retention of essay writing technique. Free-writing technique further boosts creativity and fluency, enabling students to express their ideas more freely and improve their overall writing performance.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- ✚ Educational institutions should consider integrating blended learning approaches that combine digital and traditional teaching methods. This can provide students with a more flexible, interactive, and personalized learning experience, enhancing their engagement and understanding of essay writing techniques.
- ✚ Teachers should implement free writing exercises within the curriculum to foster creativity and fluency. Allowing students to express their ideas freely without the constraints of structured writing can improve their confidence and overall writing performance. Schools and teacher should design assignments and activities that encourage unstructured writing to complement formal writing instruction.
- ✚ Professional development programme for teachers should include training on effective blended learning strategies and

the integration of free writing techniques. This will equip teachers with the skills needed to implement these approaches successfully and enhance their instructional practices.

✚ Teachers should regularly assess and monitor students' writing progress using both formative and summative assessments. This will help identify areas where students may need additional support and ensure that the blended learning approach and free writing techniques are meeting educational goals.

✚ Teachers should create classroom environments that encourage creative expression and experimentation in writing. By fostering a supportive atmosphere for free writing and innovative thinking, educators can help students develop their writing skills more effectively.

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